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ABSTRACT

All talk of sex was taboo in Korean society until the middle of this century. Only during the last decade has sexuality been a topic of discussion, but still the discourse was dominated by traditional male views regarding sex. Today, the number of homosexuals living openly is growing, and active debate about homosexuality in Korea is now emerging. The current state of homosexual human rights is explored through the following topics: "Homosexuality in the Korean Historical Record"; "Contemporary Homosexual Community in Korea"; "Social Activism on Homosexuals' Rights"; "Homosexuals and the Law"; "Homosexuality and the Mass Media"; and "Academic Activity." This paper includes results of surveys which sampled the number of gays in a given population and polled the attitudes of Korean psychologists towards homosexuals. Most Koreans seem to accept that the historical silence is evaporating and that homosexuality is becoming increasingly visible in their society; there is, however, concern that internalized homophobia may now find external expression. As the number of openly gay Koreans increases it is likely that the demand for civil rights will rise. Until there are more public and professional supporters of gay rights, it will be difficult for homosexuals to achieve civil rights and legal recognition. (LSR)

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Do Human Rights Exist for Korean Gay Men and Lesbians?

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All talk of sex was taboo in Korean society until the middle of this century, and it has only been during the last decade or so that discussions about sexuality have slowly opened up. However, the discourse has been dominated by traditional male views regarding sex and related issues such as prostitution, pornography, or sexual aggression. It was within and despite this social environment that I wrote the first textbook on human sexuality for Korean college students (Youn, 1990).

In the chapter on homosexuality written for that book, I was tolerant, but much less accepting of homosexuality than I am now. Since then I have read many articles on gay issues, and have become even more aware of their importance. This heightened awareness has been reflected in my writings throughout the decade, and has provoked some interesting responses from readers.

From mid-1994 to early 1996, I published nine articles on human sexuality in a bimonthly magazine issued by the SKC, which distributed 50,000 copies of each issue to college students gratis. The topic of the January 1995 article was homosexuality, and the need for understanding and acceptance (Youn, 1995a). A student proclaiming to be a Christian denounced my position in the "Readers' Comments" column in the following issue.

Three months later, I published an article on sociocultural prejudices against gay people in the annual magazine put out by the Women Students' Association of the University of Korea (Youn, 1995b). I argued in that paper that prejudice against gays and lesbians was fundamentally connected to prejudice against women, the elderly, or people of colour.

In recent times, the issues concerning gays and lesbians have finally been taken up by other writers in Korea. A book of testimonials detailing the pain and grief suffered by 10 gay Korean men was published here in early 1995, although it was not widely accepted by the general population. This spring, an essay written by an openly gay man criticizing our oppressive sexual culture was distributed throughout the mass media (Suh, 1996).

I myself received a telephone call this spring from a reporter from the monthly magazine "Light and Salt", published by the Christian Tyrannus Ministry Society. She questioned me on my views regarding homosexuality, explaining that a section of the June 1996 issue of the magazine would be dedicated to the topic. It became clear that we held very different views on the subject, and my citation of psychological studies on the healthiness of homosexuality and the harmfulness of homophobia left her unmoved. Sure enough, when I opened up the June issue of that magazine, I found eleven articles explaining that homosexuality was a sin, a mental disorder, or a developmental disorder. Most of the authors in that section were college theology professors. A few were medical doctors.

I am not sure how many Koreans share the opinions expressed in that magazine, but I think that an active debate over the issue of homosexuality is finally opening up in Korea. My next contribution to this debate will be a book, slated for publication at the end of this year (Youn, 1996), which presents sympathetic psychological understandings of homosexual orientation, fanning the

flames of the debate from the minority side. But rather than anticipating that contribution, I wish to use the remainder of my time today to highlight and position the debate over homosexuality in the Korean social and historical context. I wish to present instances where homosexuality was mentioned in Korean historical records, to detail the agendas of Korean gay rights activist groups, legal issues that constrain gay lifestyles, the treatment of gay issues in the mass media, and academic activity on homosexual issues. My presentation on each of these issues will be brief, but I hope sufficient to provide a good basic understanding of the state of current civil rights for gays and lesbians in Korea.

Homosexuality in the Korean Historical Record

There is very little mention of homosexuality in Korean literature or in traditional historical accounts. However, some members of royal families have been described in ways that suggest that they were gay or bisexual (Youn, 1996). The earliest example is Hyekong, the 36th king of the Shilla dynasty (BC 57 - AD 918), who was crowned in August 765 at the age of 8 upon the death of his father. His behaviour was thought to be girlish, and historians described him as a man by appearance but a woman by nature. He was killed in April 780 by his subordinates because they could not accept his 'femininity'. So even the king received no sympathy for his homosexual orientation, and was violently suppressed for his unorthodox behaviour.

There are stories about Myojung, a very young Buddhist monk who lived during the reign of Wonsung (AD 785-798), the 38th king of the Shilla dynasty. I'm not sure if he was famous for his beauty per se, but it is said that he was loved and sought after by several male Shilla aristocrats, and even by a Chinese Emperor from the Tang dynasty (AD 618-907). This story has been chronicled as a myth, but we may surmise from it that sexual contact between males was known to occur.

Kongmin, the 31st king of the Koryo dynasty (AD 918-1392, his reign, 1352-1374), was famous for his predilection for falling in love with young boys. He had not shown any interest in boys until his wife, a Chinese princess, died in childbirth in 1365. After her death, Kongmin ceased attending to matters of state, and spent all of his time pursuing boys and Buddhism. A few years later he even established an organization for seeking out and recruiting handsome young boys. His reputation as a pervert has been cemented since that time. I believe he could be described as sequential bisexual (Youn, 1996).

The palace chronicles from the Choson dynasty (1392-1910) reveal an instance of lesbianism. Sejong, the 4th Choson ruler, convened a meeting of his Cabinet on October 24, 1436, to discuss the rumours that his daughter-in-law had been sleeping with her maidservant. These rumours had been somehow confirmed, so the ministers advised the king to strip his daughter-in-law of her noble status, to preserve the honour and dignity of the royal family. To contain the rumours, some

pretext for her expulsion would have to be fabricated, as the truth might tarnish the image of the throne. The prime minister was allocated the task, and he proclaimed that the king's daughter-in-law would have to be expelled from the palace due to her deficiencies of character, such as frequent lying, extreme jealousy, and so on.

The historical record contains no mention of homosexuality among the lower classes, but in the oral tradition of Korean folklore, there are many stories about anal intercourse between men.

The Contemporary Homosexual Community in Korea

The Korean Gay Scene

A gay Korean man living in the USA has testified to the existence of a gay community in Seoul during the 1970's. He said that many lesbians and gay men got together to meet each month at a specific Chinese restaurant (Lee, 1996). Although there were over a hundred people considered to belong to this community, their organization remained informal, casual, and as invisible as possible.

In the early 1990's, an American lesbian who had moved to Korea for a few years on business purposes tried to find a lesbian bar in the country, but failed because no such place existed at that time. Aware of the lack of public spaces and organizations for lesbians in Korea, she placed ads in English-language Korean Newspapers such as the Korea Times and the Korea Herald. Eight foreign women living in Korea answered her ads, forming a lesbian group called Sappho in November 1991 (Lee, 1996). The membership of Sappho changed often because most of its members returned to home countries (e.g., the USA, Canada, Belgium, Sweden, Australia, etc.) after 2 or 3 years of working in Korea. Sappho was comprised of 20 members as of the spring of this year.

Over in the USA, groups for lesbian and gay Korean-Americans were founded in New York (December 1990), and in Los Angeles (August 1993). Several members from these American groups have been in contact with Sappho, and have discussed forming Korean gay/lesbian rights groups and providing outreach and support to their various friends. One Korean-American involved in this effort together with 3 Korean lesbians and 2 gay Korean men living in Korea decided to form the first formal Korean gay rights organization, named the Cho-Dong Society (meaning: "Cho-lock" green, the colour of peace, is "Dong-saek" the same, for everybody) on January 7, 1994. By that time, the group consisted of 3 lesbians and 4 gay men.

However, the Cho-Dung society broke up only one month later due to serious infighting between the lesbians and the gay men. In the wake of the break-up, 7 gay men reorganized the group as a gay-male-specific organization called Chin-gu-sa-i (meaning "Between Friends") on February 7, 1994. The membership

of "Between Friends" rose only to 15 members in the first month, but jumped to almost 120 members by June 1996. The lesbians made no public moves for 9 months following the dissolution of the Cho-Dong Society, whereupon they formed a new group called Ki-ri-ki-ri (meaning "Togetherness") on November 27, 1994. The group was founded by only 7 members, but the numbers quickly swelled to 80 members by December 1995. They could claim around 100 members as of this June, 1996.

The first gay campus organization emerged at Yonsei University on April 1, 1995. A graduate student in sociology came out publicly as gay student, and placed an ad for forming a gay students association in the campus newspaper in March 1995. Seven student joined to form "Come Together" the first Korean campus association for gay college students. Following their successful start, an bisexual student at Seoul National University tried to publish a similar ad in his own campus newspaper, but the ad was refused. So he postered the campus with flyers instead, founding Ma-Um 001 (meaning "Heart 001"), a group committed to the rights of oppressed sexual minorities.

Enormous controversy surrounded the founding of both of these campus groups, but when a third campus group "People with People" was established at the University of Korea in September 1995, there was comparatively little uproar. As of July 1996, I am aware of at least 5 gay student organizations at Korean universities.

Social Activism on Homosexuals' Rights

The first and most prominent public act carried out by these gay/lesbian rights organizations has hitherto been the publication and distribution of newsletters. The first issue of the Cho-Dong Society's newsletter was printed on January 25, 1994, and distributed to known gay meeting-places. Since its collapse in March 1994, newsletters have been produced as regularly as possible by "Between Friends". Lack of funds has been an occasional problem for the newsletter, but recently, in July 1996, the 11th issue of the newsletter came out. Ki-ri-ki-ri published 5 issues of their newsletter between their founding and the end of 1995, before switching to a magazine format entitled "Yet Another World" this spring.

Besides publications, both groups have held 3-day "Human Rights Schools" every summer. About 50 homosexual or bisexual people, 10 women and 40 men, participated in the first Human Rights School in August 1995. A second School is planned for this August. In addition, these groups plan to sponsor a gay and lesbian film festival this fall. They are also planning outreach strategies to help closeted Korean homosexuals.

A third area of activity for these organizations has been international networking. "Come Together", the Yonsei University group, enrolled some of its membership at the Lesbian and Gay Study Center in New York last February.

With Sappho's assistance, Ki-ri-ki-ri sent members to the Third General Meeting of the Asian Lesbian Network (ALN), bringing together around 100 lesbians from 7 Asian countries, held from August 11 to August 14, 1995 in Taipei. This was Ki-ri-ki-ri's first opportunity to contact lesbians from other countries (Lee, 1996). The ALN, as you may have heard, was founded by a group of Asian-American lesbians attending the International Lesbian Information Service meeting held in 1986 in Geneva, Switzerland. Their first official meeting was in Bangkok in 1990, and the second occurred in Tokyo in 1992, involving around 170 lesbians from 13 countries.

Homosexual Lifestyles and the Law

Homosexuals in Korea have no established tradition of overtly discriminatory laws to struggle against. There are no sodomy laws proscribing oral or anal intercourse, largely because these act have traditionally been considered utterly unmentionable in any public forum or document. Furthermore, no case has yet been made before Korean courts in which homosexuality was any kind of issue. No one has mentioned homosexuality in any divorce proceedings, job dismissal cases, custody or adoption battles. This is probably due to the fact that few homosexuals came out publicly before the 1990's.

Homosexuality's very unimaginability has probably enabled many young gay couples to live together as roommates, completely free from all suspicion. Occasionally, one member of a homosexual couple has been known to take on the clothes of the opposite sex as a disguise or as a transvestite, to prolong the period of living together. However, until very recently most homosexuals have acquiesced to societal pressures and entered heterosexual marriages at the appropriate age. Very few have tried to resist this traditional legacy of the Korean patriarchy.

This situation has changed dramatically in the 1990's. The number of homosexuals coming out of the closet is growing day by day. Korea has witnessed its first lesbian commitment ceremony on November 27, 1995. It is probably just a matter of time before the Korean courts are faced with demands for the legal recognition of gay marriages, for the adoption of children by gay couples, or for divorces and child custody battles involving issues of sexual orientation.

With the support of gay organizations, the number of gay bars has increased in Korea, and while once they tended to be restricted to club areas in the downtown core, now they are tending to appear closer to college campuses. The widening availability of computer networks is also proving to be a boon to gay adolescents struggling to come to terms with their sexual orientation in hostile environments, with gay chat lines offering them a safe, anonymous place to build homosexual identities. Computer networks and pocket beepers also offer an alternative way of meeting people for those who don't like bars or who don't drink.

While overt homophobia has not been a prominent feature of Korean society

to date, as homosexuality becomes increasingly visible, our enormously strong internalized homophobia may begin to find external expressions. Although in the past, open homosexuals were occasionally intimidated by others, very few serious hate crimes targeting gays and lesbians have been recorded to date. This may soon change. Overt antigay sentiments are beginning to surface as gay rights groups begin coming to the attention of the general public. For example, an evening gala scheduled by the Yonsei University group "Come Together" was interrupted by a quarrelsome group students belonging to a campus Christian organization. I suspect that this trend will continue, and that open acts of antigay violence will eventually erupt in Korean society because of the increased visibility of homosexuality. This will have legal ramifications, especially at the level of policing.

Homosexuality and the Mass Media

The mass media in Korea, as elsewhere, tends to broadcast programs representing homosexuality in a negative or voyeuristic light, if the issue appears at all. Scenes of inter-male public bathhouse rapes, of transvestites entertaining in nightclubs, of AIDS patients represented as having caught their disease from gay male partners, and the like are typical. The danger that the general audience for such programs will come to equate these relatively rare behaviours with homosexuality per se is very strong. All homosexuals will be stereotyped as pathological. Some foreign films involving gay characters have been well received in recent times, but because they are foreign, they permit viewers to persist in their belief that homosexuality itself is a foreign phenomenon that does not exist in Korean society. And as recently as 2 years ago, the Korean Broadcasting Commission refused to allow MBC-TV to broadcast the British film "the Crying Game".

On a more promising note, there have been several noble attempts to use the mass media to portray homosexuality positively and to dispel homophobic myths, albeit with uneven success. The first such program was a one-hour cable TV program for adolescents featuring myself in my role as a psychologist, and a gay man speaking from his experience. The host of the program was sympathetic, and we were able to discuss antigay prejudice in fair detail. Unfortunately, it is unlikely that many adolescents watched the program, since cable TV was not widespread at the time.

A few weeks later I was contacted by an SBS television producer working for what was then the top-rated weekly TV program of the year. He was interested in making a program on issues related to homosexuality, and asked for my participation. I refused initially, because the show had broadcast a program which pathologized homosexuality a few years prior. But the producer assured me that he recognized the error of the first production, and that this broadcast would be approached quite differently. Six members of the production staff visited my

office, spending about 10 hours with me over two days, after which I felt confident that they had been persuaded to take on very liberal views of homosexuality.

Given these assurances, I was quite shocked to see the program which was finally televised! It was rather awkward and disjointed, and ended up delivering the overall message that psychiatry could change people's sexual orientations from gay to straight, because sexual orientation was in part determined by experience. Two weeks after the broadcast, the producer called to beg my pardon. As it turned out, the senior managers of the broadcast company had refused to approve the original program, and had insisted that if a program on homosexuality was to be aired at all, it would have to include the abovementioned alterations. The producer claimed even to have threatened his resignation in his attempts to get the original program to air, but to no avail.

Later, I was offered another opportunity to appear on a live telecast discussion about homosexuality to be aired by KBS on December 9,1995. The production staff expressed their intentions as a desire to telecast the perspectives of "socially oppressed persons". Besides myself, a gay man and a bisexual man had been invited to speak during the show. However, the atmosphere on the set was very tense, and 5 minutes before going on the air, several senior managers began quarreling with the program's producer over the idea of broadcasting gay voices. The managers remained in the theater during the broadcast, and warned the producer that the program would be interrupted if anything "happened". Although the station received many calls from viewers, primarily middle-aged men, who objected to the topic of the show on principle, the telecast was allowed to continue without further incident.

Other promising developments include an MBC Korean television drama broadcast on September 29,1995, in which the contents of the diary of a young homosexual woman were featured. This episode of the drama received some partially favourable reviews by Korean gay rights groups. There was also a Korean movie made about love between two men, entitled "Broken Branches" which made its debut at the Vancouver Film Festival in January, 1996.

Academic Activity

There has so far been no scholarly activity in Korea specifically focused on defining categorical differences between homosexuals or bisexuals and heterosexuals, even though homosexuality is widely perceived as wrong or pathological. There have been theological papers written about the sinfulness of homosexuality in Biblical terms. But in the social sciences in Korea, I can only report on 3 master's theses on homosexual issues, all written within the last year, and all gay-positive. One paper investigated the attitudes of social workers towards homosexuality and homosexual people, the other was an ethnographic study conducted in the Korean gay community, and the third offered a sociopolitical analysis of issues surrounding gay liberation in Korea. I am also aware of one

student in clinical psychology who is preparing to write her master's thesis on gay issues.

In the spring of this year, I undertook a mail survey of 254 psychologists who were listed by the Korean Psychological Association as specializing in clinical or counseling psychology or psychotherapy. I received only 97 responses (M-age = 43.8 yrs, SD = 9.4; 48 men & 49 women), which makes for a response rate of 38.2%. Although some people did not receive the packages mailed to them for a variety of reasons, I still consider this response rate a little too low. The package contained a 4-item questionnaire concerning homosexuality. Responses to these items did not vary according to the age or gender of the respondents.

The first item read: "To what degree do you think learning factors determine a person's development of a gay or bisexual orientation?". The responses to this item were translated into percentages. The mean percentage for this sample was about 65.2% (SD = 20.3), which is to say that about 57% of the respondents believe that learning accounts for more than 70% of what determines sexual orientation, and that 10.8% of the sample believes that learning accounts for less than 30% of the determining factors.

Items 2 and 3 asked: "What is your position regarding gay or bisexual lifestyles?", "What was ...[it]... 5 years ago?". These items were presented with 9-point Likert scales ranging from "1 - Strongly Unacceptable", to "9 - Strongly Acceptable". As shown on the table below, the opinions of the psychologists sampled are much more gay-positive now than they were 5 years ago ($F = 87.4$, $p < .001$).

[Insert Table about here]

The last item asked them if they had ever had and openly homosexual or bisexual client before. Those who had were asked to write about the issues they had discussed with their clients in general terms. Forty-eight respondents claimed never to have had homo/bisexual clients, and 50 answered positively that they had had such clients. The latter group of psychologists reported that their clients either came to discuss early fears that they might be gay, or to discuss their fear that either they or their partner would be forced to marry due to family or societal pressures.

Concluding Remarks

Who knows how many gays, lesbian and bisexuals there are in Korea? In a survey I conducted once of 636 Koreans ranging in age from their teens to their fifties, 4.5% of the males and 2.6% of the females answered that they had had sexual contact with a member of the same sex more than 5 times in the previous 6 months (Youn, 1995c). It is likely that very few of these people had ever openly revealed their homosexuality due to the traditional conservatism prevailing in our

society, but most people seem to accept that this silence is now evaporating, and that homosexuality is becoming increasingly visible in Korean society.

I personally have no doubts that the increasing numbers of Koreans who are openly homosexual will sooner or later be raising their voices to demand civil rights and legal recognition of their lifestyles. But to win these rights, their movement must be supported by heterosexual allies who are believers in social justice and equality. To my regret, there are few social and behavioural scientists currently willing to speak out as supporters of this cause, and to the best of my knowledge, no Korean mental health professional (psychologist or psychiatrist) has come out publicly as a homosexual to date. I hope that such professionals do begin to come out, and that the lawyers, doctors, politicians and social scientists of our country come to understand homosexuality in a positive light, regardless of their sexual orientation. Justice is never justice unless it is justice to all.

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Table. Acceptability of Gay Lifestyles

viewpoint	M (SD)	response format		
		unacceptable (1-4)	neutral (5)	acceptable (6-9)
present	6.0 (1.8)	19.6%	9.3%	71.1%
past	4.6 (2.0)	45.4%	15.5%	39.2%